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The Bittersweet Vine: Fairy Tales and Nursery Rhymes

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Abstract

Contrasts more modern versions of fairy tales with less sanitized early versions. Recounts the darker meaning behind some well-known nursery rhymes. Contends that removing the harshness of original versions is a mistake, because denying the “bitter truth” doesn’t build inner strength.

Additional Keywords

Fairy tales—Psychological aspects; Nursery rhymes—Psychological aspects

The Bittersweet Vine

Fairy Tales and Nursery Rhymes

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Give me beauty; give me lies —
Give me dreams that cannot shatter.
Take the harshness; take the truth —
Take the pain and seek to scatter.

Bitter shadows lurk in the still darkness of reality. Humanity, if given the choice, would choose to run from these harsh realities, yet these very truths — the bittersweet vine of fairy tales and nursery rhymes — have shaped human history. The beauty of life does not condemn humanity; the beauty of life does not force humanity to look into a mirror; the beauty of life does not trouble the mind. However, truth — especially the bittersweet vine of fairy tales and nursery rhymes — does condemn humanity; this bittersweet vine does force humanity to look into the mirror of the past and present; this bittersweet vine does trouble the mind.

Originally, authors penned nursery rhymes and fairy tales to describe the harsh realities of those bitter times. Detailing these realities historically served as an outlet for that society's pain. Understanding these harsh realities gave the courage to conquer those bitter times. Finding the truth, the truth in fairy tales and nursery rhymes, although a bitter experience, strengthens the soul to deal with pain. The original versions of "Sleeping Beauty," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Cinderella," "London Bridge," and "Ring-a-Ring o' Roses" destroy childhood dreams. Instead of focusing on beautiful fantasy, these fairy tales and nursery rhymes mirror the painful realities of the past: rape, adultery, cannibalism, incest, jealousy, mutilation, seduction, destruction, human sacrifice, and death.

However, this bittersweet truth — the bittersweet vine of fairy tales and nursery rhymes — at the same time blesses humanity. Running from the bitter truth, the bitter vine, does not build character; running only serves to stunt spiritual growth, the growth that builds inner strength. Sweetness, the sweet vine, builds character by using the experience of the past pain in life to bear the present pain in life. Then and only then will spiritual growth develop. Only by facing the pain of the past will today's society, singly and as a whole, cope with the pain of the present. Fairy tales and nursery rhymes bless humanity as this bittersweet vine.

Probing into fairy tales shatters dreams. Behind each fairy tale, religiously read as a bedtime story, lurks a hidden darkness, but why? In his study, Panati suggests,

> Children witnessed drunkenness and drank at an early age. And since public floggings, hangings, disemboelments, and imprisonment in stocks were well attended in town squares, violence, cruelty, and death were no strangers to children. Life was harsh. Fairy tales blended blissful fantasy with that harsh reality. And exposing children to the combination seemed perfectly natural then, and not particularly harmful.
>
> (Panati 168-169)

Perrault's account of "Sleeping Beauty" eliminated many of the horrifying trials that this princess endured, thus stealing the opportunity for spiritual growth in society. Originally centering on rape, adultery, and cannibalism, this fairy tale forces society, wanting change in the present, to search within itself. Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty" departs from the original version after Talia's father, the king, places her in a velvet chair after she pricks her finger with the poisonous thorn. From this point forward, Perrault deliberately hides the truth.

In the original version, another king (Prince Charming in the modern version) discovers Talia, the princess, sleeping on the velvet chair inside the palace. Failing to arouse Talia, the king, overwhelmed by her beauty, rapes her and then leaves the palace. Nine months later, still sleeping, Talia gives birth to twins, a girl and a boy named Sun and Moon. Searching for Talia's breast one day, one of the babies mistakenly begins to nurse from Talia's finger. The baby sucks so hard that the poisonous splinter dislodges from Talia's finger, thus waking her from the deep sleep (Bettelheim 227).

Months pass. Remembering his pleasurable encounter with the princess, the king returns to the palace and finds Talia awake with his two beautiful children. Talia and the king bask in a week-long affair before he leaves her again. Conveniently, he neglects to inform Talia of his hidden secret — his wife (Panati 170).

After discovering the king's deception, his wife, in the king's name, sends for Talia's two children. Upon their arrival, she orders her cook to kill the children and serve them for her husband's dinner that night. Unknown to his wife, the cook spares the children and substitutes goat meat. Sending for Talia, the queen plots to burn Talia alive: Talia has stolen the king's love from her. At the last minute, the king rescues Talia, throws his own wife into the fire, finds his children still alive, and finally marries Talia (Bettelheim 227-228). Perrault curiously closes his revision with a rhyme suggesting the rape, yet not boldly stating this fact: "Lucky people, so 'tis said / Are blessed by

Fortune whilst in bed" (Bettelheim 228). Rape, adultery, and cannibalism lived and breathed in the past, just as they live and breathe in the present.

Perrault allowed the gruesome ending in "Little Red Riding Hood" and decided to add his own lewd details to which other writers highly objected. Centering on a young girl's temptation, seduction, and ultimate destruction of her body and soul, Perrault used this fairy tale to instill fear in the hearts of all young girls.

Perrault begins his details as other versions do. However, he soon departs from these versions. When the wolf asks Little Red Riding Hood where her grandmother lives, she "freely" gives him the information. The wolf, masquerading as Little Red Riding Hood, gains entrance into the grandmother's home. Once inside, the wolf devours the grandmother, thus eliminating Little Red Riding Hood's protection. In this version, the wolf does not dress in the grandmother's garments; he simply lies down "naked' in her bed.

Upon the arrival of Little Red Riding Hood, the wolf, pretending to be the grandmother, invites her to get into bed with him. At this point the young girl "undresses and joins him in bed." Quite shocked at her grandmother's "nakedness", Little Red Riding Hood poses the infamous statement, 'Grandmother, what big arms you have," to which the wolf answers, "To better embrace you" (Bettelheim 167-168). After the usual exchanges, which follow the other versions, the story ends with the wolf "throwing himself onto Little Red Riding Hood" and "eating her up."

Perrault's version presents the moral that young girls should not listen to just anyone who comes along for if they do, the wolves, both gentle ones and ferocious one, will pounce on and devour the young girls (Bettelheim 167-168). No hero entered Perrault's version to save Little Red Riding Hood. Because of her succumbing to this temptation, the wolf, the seducer, completely destroyed Little Red Riding Hood's body and soul. Past and present, this theme in life exists — temptation and seduction lead to the destruction of both body and soul.

Earlier oral and written versions of "Cinderella" drastically differ from Perrault's modern day version. Truly, Perrault distorted the original theme of the fairy tale: incest, jealousy, and mutilation. Focusing on sibling rivalry, Perrault hoped to masquerade the reality of those troubling times.

Earlier versions depicted the Oedipal relationships which existed during those times. In Bettelheim's words,

> A daughter flees from her father because of his sexual desires for her; a father rejects his daughter because she does not love him sufficiently; a mother rejects her daughter because the husband loves her too much; and the rare case where a daughter wishes to replace her father's wife with a choice of her own. (Bettelheim 247)

Perrault completely eliminated this Oedipal theme; however, the earlier writers deemed the Oedipal theme essential to describe the times in which they lived. Although unrecognizable in Perrault's version, Cinderella caused her own misery due to these Oedipal entanglements between her and her father, or so the earlier versions of this fairy tale inform us.

Bettelheim's investigation reveals many earlier writings of "Cinderella' which suggest this Oedipal relationship.

> Cinderella flees from a father who wants to marry her. In another group of widely distributed tales she is exiled by her father because she does not love him as much as he requires, although she loves him well enough. So there are many examples of the "Cinderella" theme in which her degradation often without any step-mother or step-sisters being part of the story is the consequence of Oedipal entanglement of father and daughter. (Bettelheim 245)

One might ask, "Why would the earlier writers focus on such a theme in this fairy tale?" The answer lies in the fact that during this period in history certain peasant cultures accepted this element of life as normal (Bettelheim 175).

Earlier versions of "Cinderella," focusing on the sibling rivalry theme, differ in another terrifying aspect — mutilation. Perrault invented the "glass slipper" to eliminate this gruesome but important highlight. The step-sisters mutilated their feet, at their mother's command, so they could fit their feet into the slipper. In almost all versions, this fact remains. Even Grimm's fairy tales gives this account.

In this particular translation, the elder step-sister can't fit her big toe into the slipper, so the mother hands her a knife and tells her daughter to cut off her big toe. The daughter obeys her mother. This leaves one small problem: without her big toe she can't walk. Unbelievably, the prince fails to detect this deception until two white pigeons, resting on a hazel by the grave of Cinderella's mother begin to call, "Look, there is blood in the shoe: the shoe is too small; the right bride still sits at home" (Bettelheim 267). Finally seeing the blood, the prince takes the elder daughter to her home.

Now the other daughter tries to fit into the slipper, but her heel is too big. So, once again, the mother hands her younger daughter the same knife and instructs her to cut off her heel. Without question, the daughter obeys her mother. No wiser, the prince now takes the younger daughter for his bride, once again failing to see the blood oozing from the slipper. The two birds must again enlighten the prince of the deception. Returning the younger daughter, the prince finally manages to find his true bride.

However, the mutilation does not end with mere feet. Avenging Cinderella, the two white pigeons pluck out the eyes of both step-sisters, leaving them blind (Bettelheim 267). Ugly and painful to face, incest, jealousy, and mutilation still exist in the present. Running from these realities only delays societal change toward such sensitive issues.

Fairy tales exist as only one side of the coin; nursery rhymes play an equally deceptive role. Most people believe authors penned nursery rhymes specifically for the

nursery, for babes and children. As with fairy tales, nursery rhymes relieved the pressure of societal problems; nursery rhymes expressed societal pain and lewdness.

Not until the Victorian morality of the latter 1800s did writers "clean up" these rhymes, thus making them presentable to the nursery. Just as with fairy tales, adults considered children "miniature adults." Before Victorian morality, adults recited societal rhymes to children: rhymes of lewdness, rhymes of religious practices, rhymes of tavern limericks, rhymes of death (Panati 182). Two such samplings illustrated the hidden truths of nursery rhymes. "London Bridge," and "Ring-a-Ring o' Roses."

London Bridge is broken down,
Broken down, broken down,
London Bridge is broken down,
My fair lady.

Superstition and human sacrifice hide behind this famous children's game, not a very pleasant thought, but nonetheless reality. "London Bridge' refers to a timber bridge which stretched across the river Thames. This stanza describes Norway's King Olaf's destruction of this bridge. The plot thickens in this famous rhyme (Panati 191). The eleven remaining stanzas refer to the fact that no matter how the bridge was built, it was always destroyed.

At this point, superstition comes into play. People believed that the water gods tore down the bridges whenever the people built bridges across their domain. In order to appease the water gods, the townspeople buried living sacrifices in the foundations of all newly built bridges (Panati 191). Many examples exist in history which reflect this ancient superstition, and thus the remaining portion of the rhyme "London Bridge." In 1872, when the residents built the Hooghly Bridge across the Ganges, the people deemed it necessary to build the foundation on a layer of children's skulls (Opie 275). According to Opie's investigation,

> Fraser in *The Golden Bough* quotes examples of living people being built into the foundations of walls and gates to serve as guardian spirits; and all over the world stories of human sacrifice are associated with bridges, to the erection of which the rivers are supposed to have an especial antipathy. (Opie 275)

When demolitionists destroyed the Bremen, Germany Bridge Gate, they found a child's skeleton in the foundation. To stop the Aryte Bridge in Greece from falling down, the builders embedded the master mason's wife in its foundation. Erection of the Rosporden Bridge in Brittany failed until they buried a fourteen-year-old boy in its base (Opie 275). Throughout Europe, this atrocity appears in many stories. Townspeople favored children as victims; their skeletons have been unearthed in the foundations of bridges from Greece to Germany.

Superstition built the famous London Bridge as well, for the cornerstones of the first non-timber bridge in London built between 1176 and 1209 were also spattered with the blood of innocent little children (Panati 191-192). Shocking though it may be, "London Bridge' unfolds as an ancient supersitial rite, not a mere children's game. Superstition and human sacrifice surface from the past as yet another hidden secret which refuses to lay buried.

One last example, "Ring-a-Ring o' Roses" relates not only the pain of the past, but also demonstrates courage to lay down one's life for another human being.

Ring-a-ring o' roses,
A pocket full of posies,
A-tishoo A-tishoo
We all fall down.

This is another seemingly innocent nursery rhyme which hides the truth of a great tragedy in history, the bubonic plague. Writers penned this poem not for children; writers penned this poem to commemorate the "heroic death" of 226 residents of Elam, a small village in England during an outbreak of plague (McKane 446).

Each line in the rhyme refers to the plague. The plague marked its victims with "rosy hemorrhages" on their chests (McKane 446). These hemorrhages, circular in shape, surfaced as one of the earliest symptoms of the disease: thus, "Ring-a-ring o' roses." In addition, a superstition, posies providing protection against the plague arose. People carried a "pocket full of posies" to ward off the plague. In the last moments before death claimed its victims, the plague ended with a fatal sneeze; 'literally, the victim fell down dead.' The last two lines of the rhyme describe this fatal sneeze and sudden death: thus, "A-tishoo A-tishoo / We all fall down" (Panati 196).

Writers commemorated this rhyme not only to describe the pain and suffering of Elam, but also to commemorate the courageous way in which the villagers protected outsiders from this deadly plague. "Ring-a-ring o' roses" describes not only the "rosy hemorrhages," it also describes the villagers' great courage. Because of the wide outbreak of the bubonic plague, the villagers actually formed a ring around their town to protect outsiders from contracting the plague. A one-mile circle marked with stones surrounded Elam. The plague was confined to Elam because of this heroic act. No other community was harmed, yet Elam lost nearly 90% of its population to the plague; only 35 survivors remained in Elam (McKane 446). A children's game? No. "Ring-a-ring o' roses" reflects antiquity; it reflects tragedy mixed with courage; it reflects humanity's roots.

Camouflaged though it may be, the bitter sweet vine of fairy tales and nursery rhymes blesses humanity.

Give me beauty; give me lies —
  Give me dreams that cannot shatter
Take the harshness; take the truth —
  Take the pain and seek to scatter.

Finding the truth, the truth in fairy tales and nursery rhymes, although a bitter experience, strengthens the soul to deal with pain. The bittersweet vine of fairy tales and nursery

(continued on page 60)

mind and matter, but Creator and creation. Whatever it is that an angel might "say," whatever its particular communications might be — to this or that man in this or that setting — it is in its very substance, in its incorporeal corporeality, the most crucial preliminary revelation of all, forcing those who witness it to perceive what they think and to conceive what they feel afresh, and so calling them to fulfill their intended pontifical and redemptive vocation.

For it is in fact only then, when my thoughts about light are themselves made effulgent and my conception of sound begins to resonate, that I am able to experience and to help to transmit the world that God intended: a world so packed with meaning that its very weight must surely crush the ego that exposes itself unprotected, unarmed with its fallen distinctions. Only then do I glimpse, dim-glimmering through the dewy windowpane of the mind I have presumed to make mine, the shimmering outlines of Eden, as the timbre of sound and color of light are transmuted into images of their ideas, and matter flows back in the direction of God like a balloon suddenly emptied of air.

Notes

1. In speaking of angels, I have in mind throughout those beings whom these authors variously call Ainur (Tolkien), Eldila (Lewis), and Eidola or Celsitudes (Williams). See *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Allen and Unwin, 1977); *Perelandra* (London: The Bodley Head, 1943); and *The Place of the Lion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978). Though I shall be stressing only what these creatures have in common, this is not to suggest that they are equivalent or interchangeable.
2. Tolkien's use of this idea can be found in his essay "On Fairy-Stories" in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947); Lewis makes this distinction in "Meditation in a Toolshed," published in the collection *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).
3. The allusion here is to a poem by Tolkien, composed initially in response to a conversation with Lewis and as an aid to the latter's conversion, and found in the essay "On Fairy-Stories" (71-72):
   "Dear Sir," I said —"Although now long estranged,
   Man is not wholly lost not wholly changed.
   Dis-graced he may be, yet not de-throned,
   and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:
   Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light
   through whom is splintered from a single White
   to many hues, and endlessly combined
   in living shapes that moved from mind to mind.
   Though all the crannies of the world we filled
   with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
   Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
   and sowed the seed of dragons — 'twas out right
   (used or misused). That right has not decayed:
   we make still by the law in which we're made."
4. These are the qualities through which the respective archetypes of these various animals makes themselves known in Williams' *The Place of the Lion*.
5. What follows in the next three paragraphs is more or less direct quotations from Chapters One and Sixteen of Lewis' *Perelandra*.

BITTER VINE — *Continued from page 56*

rhymes builds character; this vine creates inner strength which otherwise would remain uncultivated. Searching for truth in fairy tales and nursery rhymes destroys dreams; it destroys precious bedtime stories and children's games. Even Mithridates, a king of Pontus, knew he must daily drink small doses of poison — pain in life — if he hoped to survive his enemies' assassination plot.

The poet, A.E. Houseman, dramatizes this theme in "Terence, This is Stupid Stuff."

> There was a king reigned in the East:
> There, when kings will sit to feast,
> They get their fill before they think
> With poisoned meat and poisoned drink.
> He gathered all that springs to birth
> From the many-venomed earth;
> First a little thence to more,
> He sampled all her killing store;
> And easy, smiling, seasoned sound,
> Sate the king when healths went round.
> They put arsenic in his meat
> And stared aghast to watch him eat;
> They poured strychnine in his cup
> And shook to see him drink it up;
> They shook, they stared as whites' their shirt:
> Them it was their poison hurt.
> — I tell the tale that I heard told.
> Mithridates, he died old. (Perrine 521-522)

The single dose of poison killed Mithridates' enemies. However, because Mithridates daily drank small doses of poison, he lived, he coped.

Just as Mithridates dealt with his shattered dream, the loyalty of his subjects, present society must deal with shattered dreams to cope with reality, the bittersweet vine. Destroying these dreams, ingesting past pain, cultivates the richness within the soul, spiritual strength. Courageously facing this bittersweet vine changes society, singly and as a whole. Without pain, the bitter vine, no inner strength, the sweet vine, develops. Pain calls society to change; pain challenges society to act; pain forces society to cope. Past or present, pain never dies. Only by mirroring the pain of the past will society, singly and as a whole, cope with the pain of the present. Fairy tales and nursery rhymes bless humanity as this challenging mirror — the bittersweet vine.

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